

AVOIDING DISCRIMINATION IN SPEECH AND WRITING

The Department of Philosophy has resolved to strongly encourage its members--students, instructors and support staff--to avoid the use of group-discriminatory language and, positively, to employ language in ways which foster the equal valuing of members of different sexes, and of different ethnic and other groups. It has done this because of its belief in the equality of females and males, of those with and without evident disabilities, and of people of different races, ethnicities, religions and sexual orientations; and in the conviction that our use of language, and choice of what to speak about, can importantly influence the ways in which we, and our audience, perceive, and feel towards, the members of these different groups. (We think that this is true even in cases where the speaker, and those addressed, are already committed to a belief--at least on the conscious level--in the equality with others of members of the relevant groups.)

Reasons similar to ours have, as you may know, led others to make recommendations, and establish policies, concerning the avoidance of group-discriminatory language and related matters; and, especially, concerning the avoidance of language that discriminates on the basis of sex, or gender. (Because linguistic distinctions of gender are far more often made than ones between, for example, members of one race and another, our language probably tends to discriminate more against females than it does against members of other generally disadvantaged groups.)¹

Our primary concern here is, of course, with the elimination of group-discriminatory practices from speech and writing that occur in the contexts of the classroom, research and administrative activities of the Department; so, with eliminating it from lectures, class discussion, essays, theses, research papers, letters and memoranda, and the like. It is our hope, however, that habits which we form for the avoidance of discriminatory discourse in these contexts will carry over to others, and that this will help set an example also to people outside the Department and the University.

In what follows we offer some suggestions on how to speak and write in a nondiscriminatory way. There are differing views--which we might do well to discuss among ourselves--as to the best substitutions to make for certain sex-discriminatory usages. That we manifest the intent to avoid discriminating is probably what matters most; though how we do it is not unimportant.

A first suggestion is to avoid the generic use of 'man' that occurs in, for example, 'Man was originally a scavenging animal' or the phrase 'political man.' (There is experimental evidence that despite the obvious intent, where 'man' is used in this way, to include females as well as males, it is often images of males only that are evoked.)- Among possible substitutions for 'man' are (according to context) 'humanity', 'the human' (this also avoids the speciesism that may be involved in omission of the definite article--we don't say 'Cat is a hunter), and 'humans' (requiring a plural verb, of course).

It seems best also, where alternatives are available, to avoid the use of compounds ending in 'man'--'mailman,' for example, and 'chairman.' (Incidentally, the use of 'chair,' to mean person who chairs a meeting goes back to the 1600s.) We should also avoid the use of gender qualifiers, as in 'female philosophers' and 'male nurse,' unless they add information essential for the meaning (e.g. 'The number of female philosophers is increasing').

Of even more frequent occurrence than the generic use of 'man' is, or has been, that of the personal pronoun 'he' as in, for example, 'If a student suspects this he should tell the instructor.' As we all know, a variety of devices are employed for avoiding this usage. One is to substitute 'he/she' or 's/he.' (However the first of these substitutions is cumbersome and still sexist in giving priority to the male gender, while the second has the disadvantage of not being reproducible in speech.) Another is to try to alternate 'she' and 'he' in such contexts. (This is hard to keep up.) Others are, where possible, to use 'one' or 'you' or pluralize the reference ('If students suspect they...') Alternatively, one may employ 'they' with singular sense ('If a student suspects this, they...') This last usage was formerly current in English and may be compared to the employment of 'you'--instead of former 'thou'--with singular sense but plural verb as in 'You, Sally, are...' Arguably, this is the usage that is most likely to be accepted in the long run. However, students should be warned, some instructors will not tolerate this use of 'they.'

As an alternative to replacing the generic 'he' by another personal pronoun one may sometimes reword the sentence so that no pronoun is needed. For examples of this see below.

Gender-discriminatory also is the tendency to refer mainly or exclusively to males (real or imaginary) where females could just as appropriately be referred to. For example, in constructing a logic problem ('Bob is either tall or overweight. Therefore Bob is tall.'). or in describing, for the sake of illustrating or testing a theory, a hypothetical situation ('A man has the choice of either keeping his promise

to a dead friend, to destroy his valuable stamp collection, or to donate the collection to a charity.')

This tendency should not be hard to correct. In correcting it we might also take the opportunity, where it is presents itself, to combat sexual stereotypes. For example, where we are wanting to speak of a bus-operator, we could make her (them?) female.

In constructing philosophical examples etc., we should, as well as using names of females as often as those of males, try to ensure a fair representation of non-Anglo-Saxon names. Here is a selection of such names, taken from Philosophy class lists. Of females: Yiu-Fong, Nandini, Francesca, Bintang, Sabhiya, Francette, Man Wah. Of males: Jose, Rajeev, Mario, Tibebu, Franz, Omar, Kwok Keung.

How we refer to a group can also matter. Naturally we will avoid group-designations that are obviously offensive. As well, however, designations like 'the Chinese' and 'the disabled' may be felt as distancing and slightly derogatory. 'Chinese people' and 'disabled persons' would be preferred.

The existence of--what is in our culture--a minority outlook or lifestyle can also be recognized through the choice of a hypothetical situation to illustrate a philosophical point. For example, by making the situation concern a bat mitzvah or a love-relationship between two people of the same sex. Further, we might take more account, in our selection of substantive issues to treat, of the viewpoints and circumstances of minority groups. For example, in discussing religion, to look at the beliefs of those who do not conceive of God as a patriarchal (or matriarchal) creatorial being. And, in discussing perception and language, to observe that not everyone has both sight and hearing; and that those who do not commonly have heightened sensibilities and ways of communicating (as by sign language) that are not only of interest in themselves but sometimes require us to modify generalizations that we are otherwise inclined to make.

In conclusion, we give some additional examples of discriminatory language with nondiscriminatory alternatives. Most of these examples are taken, or adapted, from publications that were mentioned above.

EXAMPLE

ALTERNATIVE

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| 1. Each student is expected to try as hard as he can. | Each student is expected to try as hard as possible. |
| 2. The philosopher uses his reason. | The philosopher uses reason. |
| 3. The director must submit his budget by March 1st. | The director must submit a budget by March 1st.
-OR-
The budget must be submitted by the director by March 1st. |
| 4. If the writer plans ahead, he will save a lot of effort. | The writer who plans ahead will save a lot of effort. |
| 5. As someone (one) grows older, he grows more reflective. | As one grows older, one grows more reflective.
-OR-
In growing older, people grow more reflective. |
| 6. People are different: one may be assertive in his interpersonal relations, while another may be timid in his approach to the world. | People are different: one may relate to others assertively, while another may approach the world timidly.
-OR-
People are different: one may be assertive in her interpersonal relations, while another may be timid in his approach to the world. |

NOTE: The second alternative illustrates the technique of alternating masculine and feminine pronouns when giving examples. Notice that switching 'her' and 'his' here would just reinforce sexual stereotypes and result in a sentence that is perhaps even more sexist than the original.

EXAMPLE

ALTERNATIVE

7. man and wife; men...ladies; men...girls; three male students and two coeds

wife and husband; men...women; men...women; five students (two females and three males)

NOTE: Of course, if the ages are right, 'men...girls', or 'girls... men' may be appropriate, as may 'women.. .boys.'

8. males and females; men and women; sons and daughters; descendants of Adam and Eve; his and her

females and males; women and men; daughters and sons; descendants of Eve and Adam; her and his

NOTE: Varying the order in this way both counters the implication that males take priority over females and enlivens discourse by avoiding cliché.

9. fireman, policeman, mailman, draftsman, businessman, repairman and housewife

firefighter, police officer, mail carrier, drafter, business executive (person), repairer, and homemaker

10. Facilities need to be provided for the blind, the deaf and those who are confined to a wheelchair as well as for normal people.

Facilities need to be provided for persons who are blind or deaf or need to use a wheelchair as well as for other people (people who are not disabled in these ways).

1. The Carleton Office of the Co-ordinator for the Status of Women, for example, has published 'Guidelines for Avoiding Sex Stereotyping in Carleton University Communications' (you may want to obtain a copy); the University of Ottawa has its 'Guidelines for Gender Parity in University Texts'; and the Office for Disabled Persons (Ontario) has put out a 'Lexicon' of preferred terms to employ in talking about disabled persons. Several Federal government departments have issued their own guidelines for the elimination of sexual stereotyping. A committee of the American Philosophical Association has published 'Guidelines for Non-Sexist Use of Language.'